

J.H. PRYNNE, Guangzhou, 2005
POETIC LANGUAGE & THE EAST–WEST SITUATION

[MC introduction: "First, we're going to have a keynote speech delivered by J.H. Prynne."]

It's wonderful to be here. I saw the blue sky this morning and I assumed it must be some kind of special arrangement made out of respect. However, it looks real enough. It's good to be with familiar faces and in a place which I have come to know and for which I have much affection.

I have for this morning's talk a small, quite limited subject. It is nothing more or less than poetic language in the history of the current situation of the East and the West and the whole planetary situation. A small topic, easily managed in a couple of sentences. I'm sure I should enjoy dismissing it with scarcely a passing thought.

Two Great Poetical Traditions

It is a remarkable feature — if we think of it historically, as for a moment we shall, in order finally to put history to one side — that there are, at the present time, two great poetical traditions on the planet. One of them is the English poetical tradition and the other, of course, is the Chinese. And if I were speaking justly, I should put them the other way around, because the Chinese tradition is older, deeper, and has a much more complicated origin than the English.

It's worth noting, in passing, that the American literary tradition is a mere teenager. It has scarcely begun. It borrowed most of its initial forms from its colonial origins as an offshoot of English culture, and now it is struggling to find its way in the world. Perhaps in five hundred or a thousand years it might become a mature culture. At the moment it is merely a powerful one. So we can set the whole of American culture to one side. It is not a serious player in this game.

We're talking now of a serious and deeply rooted, complex cultural accomplishment — on the English side and on the Chinese side. And the relations between these two are complicated and deeply interesting.

The Chinese literary culture is not the one that has enjoyed the longest continuous active span in recorded history. That honour goes to the Babylonian culture. The Babylonian literary language ran for longer than the Chinese one has yet done, though if the Chinese goes on for some thousand years or so more it may catch up with the record of the Babylonians. However, let us set the Babylonians to one side as well, because they are now nothing more than ancient history — buried under the residues of American tanks, poor things. Perhaps they will survive that terrible ordeal, or perhaps they won't. But not much

has been heard recently of current developments in ur-archaic poetic language, more's the shame, it should be said.

Written Language and Spoken Practice

If we restrict our attention to the English and the Chinese traditions, we recognise some very deep contrasts as well as some surprising and intriguing similarities. In both cases there is the complex interaction between a written culture — which is essentially a cultural and literary class, associated with the historic development of certain social forms associated with a minority literate class — and a popular culture of spoken language: the language of song, of everyday activity, and of cultural activities like dancing, making music, and enjoying the company of friends. Singing and dancing and various kinds of popular practice, to which the word “ceremonial” is probably too grand, are part of the life-blood of a spoken oral language in its natural cultural setting.

This contrast between a written language and a spoken cultural practice is to be found in both language systems, both the Chinese and the English.

The Chinese written system has fascinated English literate classes ever since the beginning of the last century, because of the extraordinary power of your written script and the extraordinary suggestiveness of how it records and notates the spoken forms of Chinese oral practice. We have an alphabet and you don't. We have dictionaries arranged in the order of head words; and as I have discovered, painfully, when attempting to learn your language, the use of a Chinese dictionary is a very arcane art, requiring a great deal of special practice before you can perform the simplest activity of looking up a single word.

So you have an extraordinary written system — not unique; other languages have writing systems of this kind. But actually the Chinese language is not so different from the English if you compare it to some even more structurally remote languages. Languages like those of the Eskimo, for example, are constructed on an even more unfamiliar basis than either Chinese or English, since Chinese is in some sense an isolating language — that is to say, a word-based language — and this relationship with a kind of basic grammatical form gives the English learner a kind of starting point in something not altogether unfamiliar.

On Poetry Specifically

These are very general remarks, and we have scarcely yet spoken about poetry. So we should move from the very general to the very particular.

I want to remind you of one of the very famous poems of a Tang Dynasty poet, which I am going to read to you in English. My translator has purposely not been given any advance notice of this poem, so he won't be able to read it to you in Chinese. Some of you may know it, because it is celebrated — but my access to it is through this English version, and I would

like to share with you some thoughts about that version from an English, or let us say external, point of view.

It is a poem by Meng Haoran — sufficiently famous in your great history, as nearly everyone in this room will know. He was an earlier contemporary of the great Tang poets Wang Wei, Li Bai, and then, a little later, Du Fu. The poem is translated under the title *Staying Overnight on the Jiande River*, and it reads as follows:

I guide my boat to mooring by a misty inlet,
With the setting sun, a traveller's sorrows revive.
Wild so vast, the sky stoops to the trees;
The river so clear, moon close to man.

Reading the Poem

Let us pause for a moment about this remarkable, beautiful, and complex short piece. It's a very familiar traditional subject: the lonely poet, far from home, on some journey or displacement from his natural place, from his home and his family. Out in a strange location, on his travels, unhappy to be alone and in some sense separated from his natural world. And in this condition of separation he glances around the empty, desolate landscape, which is his temporary resting place.

And it's strange, is it not, that this misty inlet — in which he has stopped, where everything that could be seen around him is obscured by water vapours — suddenly becomes, in the final line, *the river so clear, moon close to man*. Have these water vapours, these mists, parted for a moment to reveal a clear sight of the river? How has the river become clear? How does he understand now what the river means, and what he can see when he looks out over the expanse of this empty, lonely, watery landscape? How can he catch the disc of the moon in the sky? How does he feel the sky come down almost to the level of the trees around him, so that the sky momentarily touches the canopy of the earth? And how does he feel the moon itself so close that he can almost touch it?

The translation, which is expert — it was not always so, it evolved — was done by a scholar, American, I believe, called Paul Kroll. I followed the evolution of this short translation through a number of drafts. His first draft was very competent. And his final draft is quite magical and has all the power of poetic creation.

It would be even better if he had said not *the river so clear* but simply *river so clear*. There is no need for the definite article here. I would strike it out, just as the poet would have struck it out. We don't need to be told it is *the river*, because this is the only river — the only river in sight — and therefore it is every river. As a river, it needs no introduction and no casing.

Just as in the final phrase, with impeccable purity, the translator says: *moon close to man*. Moon close to man. And what the translation has also done, with great skilfulness in the

pausing and the management of little movements of emphasis, is broken this final couplet into two paired halves, trying to catch it: river so clear — *moon close to man*. It is, of course, cut in the traditional paired form, because the previous line breaks in the same way: *wild so vast, the sky scoops to the tree*.

Why Is This Poetic Language?

Why do we know, without a shadow of doubt, that this is true poetic language? Why do we know that such a thought could not be expressed in prose, and could not be expressed in music or painting? It belongs in the essential domain of the power of poetry.

What is powerful about it? And what is true about it? This brings me to some central aspects of what I want to examine. What do we value, and what do we recognise as distinctive, about the language of poetry?

First, I should disentangle an ambiguity in the phrase itself. The language of poetry is either: the language which is inside poems, used in their composition; or it is the language that poets use — which they have as their repertoire, as their place of operation, as their workshop — everything that goes on around them in the world of language, which is part of their equipment and their knowledge.

The Fish and the Poet in Language

Let me introduce here another, slightly watery aspect. Consider the situation of fish. Consider the fish in the streams and lakes who move through the water because the water is their natural element. Everywhere they go is water. If they find themselves out of water, then in a short time that will be the end of their existence. And since we are in Guangdong province, they will almost certainly end up on a plate somewhere.

(*Laughter.*) Very nice too. Your fish menus are absolutely out of this world. But if you're a fish, you don't look forward to that aspect of things very much. In fact, you don't do a lot of looking forward at all. Because although water is your element, you know nothing of it. You have no knowledge of your element. You simply, naturally, move and swim in it. It is your world. It is the condition and the limit of your world, and of it you have no knowledge or power of knowledge.

Poets move and swim about — sometimes with the stream and sometimes against the stream — in language. And here they differ from fish, because they know what they are doing. They know the element they are in. They can even survive outside language for short periods, though no doubt they gasp rather badly if the removal is prolonged. Every poet requires a daily dose of natural language to replenish his storehouse. And so the press, and the television, and all the rest of the normal practice of degraded and corrupted language, are absolutely essential to poets — and particularly so because they give poets the task and the

power of knowing where they are and what they do. Unlike fish, we know where we are, and what we are, and what we have to do in the world of language.

What Makes Poetic Language Distinct

What makes the use of language that poets make distinct? There are many things that could be said here and I'll mention only two.

The first is *radical economy*. Poetry is shorter than prose. If you're a printer, you know perfectly well that when you set poems on the page you don't need so much ink. You don't need so much time. You have all that delicious, wasted space all down the right-hand side — or, if you're setting things out in the traditional Chinese way, all down the left-hand side. Poetry is economic with the presence of words on the page, and places those words in an estranged environment of white space all around them.

This economy is strongly and deeply felt by writers and by readers alike. It means that great power can be invested in patterns of repetition and in all the devices that give poetic language its extremely organised, managed, and coherent internal structural shaping. This is characteristic, probably, of all poetic traditions on the planet, now and in the past. It is an intensely shaped activity. And the shaping essentially consists in leaving things out — in compressing and condensing — so that the record becomes acutely symbolic and displaced. Nothing is complete. Nothing is entire. Nothing is fully and totally recorded. The construction of sense, or of the presence of language, is made by the reader as a kind of act of restoring, of completing the notation which the poet has set out on the page.

The second aspect I'll mention is *truthfulness*. A community depends, for its poets, on the survival of truthfulness.

Let us try and distinguish — since some of you depend on dictionaries, as I do when I am in a foreign language — between truth and truthfulness. Truthfulness is an attitude and a performance, a stance and an accomplishment, that people can achieve when they understand the power of truth and work with it and for it. It is essentially a human act. Truthfulness is the stance of those who know what truth means and why it matters to them. Truth is an abstract idea which, as far as I know, does not exist in a glass tube without human intervention. But truthfulness requires people to do it. And if it is not done by people, it will certainly not be done by fish.